

Keep Breathing by TheLostSister

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Summary:

El's life told through her eyes after the battle of Starcourt.

1. Day 1

I wake up and I'm sweaty; my hair is stuck to my forehead and my clothes cling uncomfortably to my body. Flashes of the past few days cross my mind, and I hope it's just one very bad, long, and impossibly real nightmare, but before I can even open my eyes, I have a sinking feeling that it's not. My whole body hurts, my leg feels like it's on fire. I pry my eyes open and look around. It's not my bedroom, and I feel sick. The clothes I'm wearing aren't mine either.

I remember panicking about that last night when we got to the Byers' house.

"Let's get you ready for bed," Joyce had told me.

"I- I don't-" I hiccupped, my lungs felt empty. "I don't have any pajamas."

It wasn't just clothes I was worried about; I had *nothing*.

No Hopper.

No home.

It was all gone just like that.

"It's okay, baby, you can wear some of mine," Joyce promised me anyway.

She'd cleaned me up and helped me change my clothes because for some reason, my body felt disconnected from my brain, and I could barely move.

The bed is empty now, but I remember waking up once and seeing Joyce asleep next to me.

My eyes scan the two small tables next to the sides of the bed looking for a clock. I finally find it across the room on a dresser instead. The red numbers blur together, but I think it says 1:26, or maybe it says 1:56. I blink a few times, but I still can't tell for sure.

Either way, it's after 1 PM, and I've never slept until 1 o'clock before. I should get up, but I don't. What was there to do anyway? I didn't really want to be around any people, but I also didn't want Joyce to bring me back to the cabin where I would be *very* alone. From the little bit I remember before we left, it had gotten so messed up, and now I would have to fix it all by myself.

One time I tried to help Hopper when he was building our shed, and I did okay until I accidentally smashed my finger with the hammer. It really hurt and Hopper swore as he rushed me inside to get some ice. He sat me on the counter and said, "Maybe we'll leave using all the tools to me, okay kid?"

I know Mike would help me fix it up, but I kind of don't think he's any good at using tools either. At least, not like Hopper was.

So instead of getting up, I decide I'll stay here in bed as long as I can and maybe Joyce will let me stay here for one more night.

I kick free of the blankets and roll over. The palm of my hand feels cool, and I press it up hard against my right eye. There's a throbbing feeling behind it, and it feels better for the shortest few seconds, until no matter how hard I push, the pain won't go away.

I really wish I could fall back to sleep, and sleep for a long, long time. Until everything feels better, until Hopper is here again.

But then I realize, what if he's here right now? Maybe he's sitting at the kitchen table talking to Joyce, waiting for me to wake up so he can take me home. I so strongly convince myself that this might be true, that I throw my legs over the side of the bed and get up. I test my leg on the ground and it hurts even more than I thought was possible. It's burning and throbbing all at the same time, and I kind of feel like it would feel better if I just totally cut it off.

I manage to make it to the bedroom door and listen. I think I can make out Joyce talking to someone.

Hopper.

The thought makes all my pain disappear and I walk down the

hallway.

“Hey, sorry, but I really have to call you back later,” Joyce says to whoever she’s talking to on the phone. She hangs up and walks over to where I’m standing in front of the hallway. I glance towards the kitchen and then the living room. No Hopper.

Maybe he’s in the bathroom, but I know when I walked by it, the door was open.

“Hey sweetie,” Joyce says walking over to me. She tucks a piece of hair behind my ears. “How are you feeling?”

“Is- Is Hopper here?” I ask instead of answering. My voice sounds weird, like it’s not my own.

“No, honey, no, he’s not here,” she shakes her head and looks at me for a second, like she’s waiting for me to say something more, but I feel frozen in place. “Come here,” she says, and she guides me over to a chair at the kitchen table.

I sit down because I *really* don’t feel well.

Joyce comes back from the sink, and I hear her set a glass of water down on the table in front of me. My mouth is totally dry, but I can’t even move to reach for the glass. She pulls a chair up next to me.

“Do you remember much from last night?” she asks.

I remember how Hop held my hand and told me it was after *me*, not him, so why am I the one sitting here and he’s not?

She waits a moment and then says, “Honey, there was... an accident at the mall...?” It sounds like a question.

I manage a nod.

“Gone,” I say out loud, confirming what I knew deep down to be true.

I didn’t want to hear her say it any more than she seemed to want to be the one to have to tell me.

“Yeah, hon. I am so sorry,” Joyce whispers; her hand squeezes mine.

It almost sounds like she is apologizing for something she did. But maybe I just misinterpret it because I know that it’s all my fault, not hers.

Every bad thing that’s happened to Hopper, to Will, to Billy, to everybody...it’s because of me.

It feels like there’s still a piece of the Mind Flayer running through my whole entire body, leaving behind a trail of fire and destruction.

“I don’t feel good,” I whisper because it’s all I can say.

“Here.” Joyce brings the glass of water to my lips, and I take a sip and then another because I just want to feel better.

It was a mistake. Before the second sip even reaches my stomach, it’s coming back up. I quickly push back from the table and cover my mouth, racing to the bathroom. I don’t know if I make it, there might be a little throw up on the bathroom rug.

I bend over the toilet and even though my stomach empties pretty quickly, I somehow throw up again and again. My head hurts, my leg hurts, my throat hurts, my *body* hurts, but I can’t stop gagging. Hot tears stream down my cheeks, and I squeeze my eyes shut; I hate throwing up so much but it’s like my body won’t stop until all of my insides have come out.

It finally slows for a few moments, and I try to breathe. I realize Joyce is here with me too when I feel her hand rubbing my back.

“I don’t feel good,” I cry to her again, as if just saying those words out loud could make Joyce magically fix everything.

“I know, sweetie, I know. Try and take some deep breaths,” she encourages me.

I try, but it feels impossible.

I’ve never wanted to be with Hopper as badly as I did right now. I want him to pick me up and carry me to my bed. I want his arms to

wrap around me and to tell me that everything's okay. I would even drink the disgusting pink medicine that he gave me once when I threw up, and I wouldn't spit it out all over him this time. I would drink the whole bottle if it meant he'd come back; I would do *anything* for him to come back.

I sit up and the room is spinning.

I hear the toilet flush, and even though it sounds like she's really far away, I make out Joyce asking if I want to go back to bed.

I shake my head no. I can't leave this spot. I don't want to get sick all over her house.

"Okay, that's okay," she says.

Instead, she sits down next to me and puts an arm around me. I fall against her, and she hugs me tight to her chest. I remember once when she hugged me a long time ago and how it made me feel so much better. I remember wishing she was my mom just like she was Will's.

Her hair smells faintly of cigarette smoke, not exactly like the kind Hopper smokes, but it's close enough that I curl up against her neck.

"Shh, I've got you baby, I got you," she promises me again and again.

I close my eyes to stop the spinning, but that just makes it feel like we are falling further and further into black nothing. I hear her and Jonathan talking, and I make out the word doctor...maybe they mean Hopper. Maybe they mean he's okay, that he's just at the doctor...I drift off again.

I wake up on the bathroom floor, still propped up against Joyce. My eyes spring open when I hear a voice I don't recognize, and once I open my eyes, I realize the strange voice is coming from a man that I don't know and he's touching my leg.

I instantly pull away and bring my knees up, curling up smaller into Joyce's lap. The man reaches out for me again, and Joyce puts her hand up to stop him.

“No, please just give her a minute,” she tells him firmly. “El, honey,” she says to me a lot softer than she was just talking to the man. “This is Dr. Baker. He’s just here to take a look at you so we can get you some medicine to help you feel better.”

I cling to her tighter and squeeze my eyes shut. Hopper’s the only one who could make me feel better, and he wouldn’t like that there was a stranger here.

“It’s alright, Joyce. From what I’ve seen and what you’ve described, I think I’ve seen enough,” the strange man tells her.

He says I have a con-cus-sion.

I don’t know what that means, but after the doctor leaves, Joyce tells me it means that I hurt my head- bad. That makes sense. It does hurt *bad*.

Jonathan helps me get back into Joyce’s bed. Even though I still feel very sick, I don’t fight him because he’s just trying to help. When I get into bed, it feels impossible to stay awake.

Joyce wakes me up later. I must make some sort of sound because her eyebrows pull together, and she softly apologizes when she tells me that the doctor said I’m not supposed to sleep for very long at a time without waking up.

I want to tell her that it’s okay, that I’m just grateful that she’s letting me stay here for a little bit longer, but I can’t speak.

She hands me two different colored pills and tells me they will help make me feel a little less sick. I swallow them, and then she says she’ll be back with something to eat in a few minutes because there’s even more medicine that I have to take with food.

She comes back with a bowl of applesauce, some juice, and another empty, really big bowl, like the kind you would make spaghetti in. She tells me that if I feel sick, I can throw up right there, that I don’t have to get up to go all the way to the bathroom.

And even though I do feel really sick, I eat the applesauce and drink all of the juice because I don’t want to argue. Maybe if I’m good, if

I'm not a big problem, she will let me stay here for a few more days with her, so I try hard to do everything she asks.

The medicine makes me feel weird, like I'm floating outside of my body. But it makes everything feel better. I don't hurt. I don't even feel sad. I just feel nothing but sleepy.

I lose track of how many days I spend in and out of Joyce's bed, only really getting up to go to the bathroom. I alternate between sleeping and awake, most of the time I can't even tell if it's daytime or nighttime when Joyce wakes me up. Mike visits once, and as hard as I tried to stay awake, I ended up falling asleep. I'm not good company anyway.

One night when I wake up, I hear something different. I roll over, and Joyce is laying in bed next to me. Though she's facing the other way, I know that she's crying.

Probably because of me. I'm sure she's so tired of having to take care of another kid, tired of me sleeping in her bed, tired of having to wake up every few hours to check on me and make sure I'm okay and that I'm taking my medicine.

So the next morning, I force myself to get out of bed. I try to take all my medicine on my own because I don't want Joyce to be overwhelmed anymore. I want to show her that I'm not a problem, and I try really hard to stay awake all day too.

But it's not enough.

That afternoon, Joyce comes into the living room and asks if I'm ready to go home.

I really don't want to leave. I don't want to go back to the broken cabin all by myself. But Joyce has already been so nice, she's taken care of me when there was no one else, so I nod yes, even though I feel like I might start crying. I try hard to hold it inside, at least until we get back to the cabin and she goes home. Then I can let it all out.

The car ride home is pretty quiet. I'm trying to remember what color pills to take at what time when we get to the turn off for the cabin. It

looks similar but it also looks *wrong*. There are trees down on both sides of the long path, and it's so bare you can almost see the cabin from the road, even though it's pretty far away.

Joyce parks the car near the front steps, and I softly tell her thank you. I want to tell her more, but I don't want to start crying right now.

"Of course honey," she says; she has a weird look on her face. Joyce turns off the car, and maybe it's because I don't look like I'm ready for this, she follows me inside.

I walk through all the broken stuff on the ground and head straight for my bedroom. I can't help it; I climb on top of my bed and curl up with my teddy bear. I remember when Hopper brought it home one night after work. *To keep me company during the day if I ever felt too lonely.*

Well, now we *are* alone.

I hear Joyce moving around the cabin, and I think maybe she's going to stay and help me clean up. There's a lot that needs to be fixed, and I can barely even walk around, so I know I need her help. I get up, but once I get to my doorway and see everything in bits and pieces again, it really hits me.

And now I don't even see Joyce anymore. Maybe she's getting some tools out of the shed or maybe she decided it was too much work and left. I wouldn't blame her.

I drop down to the ground and start with the shelf of games. There's pieces of games and puzzles all over the floor and I can't even manage to pick them up without crying.

How am I going to fix everything when I can't even put a puzzle back in its box?

The door startles me and I turn around to see Joyce coming back in from outside holding one of Hopper's policeman shirts and pants. I wonder why they were outside in the first place, but I don't ask.

"Hey, you want to bring some of those with us?" Joyce asks,

motioning to the mess of mixed up game pieces.

“With?”

“Yeah...” She looks at me for a long minute. “The boys have lots of games but we can definitely bring those. Is there anything else you want to bring back to our house?”

“I’m... not staying here?” I whisper.

“Oh my gosh, sweetie.” She sets down Hop’s clothes and rushes over to me. “No, no, no. I’m not leaving you here. You are going to stay with me and Will and Jonathan.”

Tears of relief freely fall down my cheeks. I don’t want her to think I’m crying because I don’t want to go, so I quickly wipe them away.

“For... good?” I ask, just to be sure.

“Yeah, yeah for good. I am so sorry, I didn’t realize you didn’t-“ Her voice grows quiet. “El, I know I could never replace your dad, but yes, you are going to be staying at our house for good. We’re just here to pick up some things you might want to take back home for now. We will come back and get...everything else... another day. Is that all okay?”

I take another breath and nod again.

For the first time since the fourth of July, I feel like I can actually breathe.

2. Day 21

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is sort of an alternative to Too Late for Tears.

Being at Joyce's house is nice, but everything is different. We almost always eat breakfast and dinner at the kitchen table together if Joyce isn't at work. Kind of like me and Hopper used to but when I think about it, it's been a pretty long time since we ate dinner with each other like that. I wish we didn't stop doing that because I really miss that now.

I guess there's lots of things like that that I am going to miss.

Will sleeps in Jonathan's room now, and he moved all of his stuff off his desk so I can have some place to put all the things I brought back from my house.

Him and Jonathan have been really nice, but it all still feels kind of weird. Like this isn't my house or my bedroom and like I'm just having a sleepover.

Except I'm not and Hopper is never coming to pick me up to take me home.

He's been gone for 21 days now, which means tomorrow is Friday. And Friday is the day of his memorial.

Joyce told me a memorial is like a special kind of get together to celebrate someone's life. It'll be like Billy's funeral but a little different. I couldn't go to Billy's funeral because I was too tired and sick. Max understood, but when Joyce told me that they are a kind of celebration of someone's life, I feel even worse that I wasn't there for Billy's because he saved me from the Mind Flayer, and I think someone that brave should be celebrated, even if he did hurt us first.

I know it's really bad, but sometimes I wish Billy didn't save me.

Sometimes I wish I died like Hopper too.

I know Mike and my friends would be very sad like how I am when I think about Hop, and I really don't want anyone else to feel sad like this. But still, sometimes I wish I wasn't here to make problems for anyone ever again.

I'm laying in bed trying to go to sleep, but I can't stop staring at the dress and shoes I borrowed from Nancy for tomorrow. Just looking at them makes my stomach hurt. I don't know why I feel so nervous. Joyce already told me a lot about what's going to happen, and she promised that she would be there with me all day if I had any more questions.

She's kind of like Hopper because she never makes me feel stupid if I don't know or understand something and she's very easy to talk to. She told me it was okay if I cried tomorrow and that it was also okay if I didn't.

I don't know if I will.

Sometimes it feels like I should because that's what everyone does when someone dies, but sometimes I don't feel anything at all. I'm scared that if I don't feel anything, it means I've already forgotten him or that I don't really miss him that much.

But I do.

I miss him so much that I have one of his shirts under my pillow. I sleep with it because it still smells like him. I'm kind of scared that his smell is going to go away soon though. He has more clothes at the cabin than I could get, but I've only been able to go there twice so far, and my leg still hurts too much to walk that far by myself.

The second time we went, Joyce had to get some pictures and other stuff for the memorial. I showed her where all the boxes were under the floor and while she was digging them out, I snuck a pack of Hop's cigarettes into my pocket.

There's only 5 left in it. There was 6, but I took one of Joyce's lighters and burned one up outside a few days ago. I didn't smoke it; I knew I'd *really* be in trouble if I got caught doing that.

Hopper told me I could never start smoking because it was *addictive garbage*. Addictive means you feel like you can never stop.

I'd probably still get in trouble even if I wasn't smoking, but I just wanted to smell them to see if it would make it feel like Hop was still here. It wasn't really the same, but I'm going to save the other ones in case I ever do start to forget what he smelled like.

I end up staying up way too late tonight and when Joyce wakes me up in the morning, I feel like I can't get out of bed.

Instead, I just lay here and stare at the black dress hanging on the closet door just like last night. Joyce told me everyone usually wears black to a memorial or funeral, and the only dress I have is blue with pink polka dots on it. She said she would help me find something new to wear at the store when I told her I didn't have the right clothes, but I didn't want Joyce to have to spend money on me.

I never really thought a lot about money before, but Will told me that his mom doesn't have a lot and her job doesn't give her very much. That made me feel even worse because she works a lot and I know having me here costs her even more money.

When I told Mike about that, he had Nancy bring over all of her pretty dresses and shoes, and she let me borrow anything I wanted.

I stay here in bed staring at the dress and shoes until Joyce comes back in my room and sits down on the edge of my bed.

She looks so pretty in her dress, and I know I won't look anything like that. I want to tell her how pretty she is, but are you supposed to tell someone going to a memorial something like that?

I don't know, so I don't say anything.

Today already doesn't feel real; it feels like a dream or like this is someone else's life. I don't tell anyone because it feels selfish, but I kind of don't want to go to today.

I *really* don't want to say goodbye, and it's not going to change anything either way.

Joyce told me Hopper's body is not actually going to be there, so how would he even know if I was there or not? That part makes me sad because it feels like he's *nowhere*. But I also really didn't want to see him not alive either. I've seen a lot of people who are gone, and I think I would get sick if I had to see Hopper like that.

"El, honey, we have to leave soon," Joyce tells me. She's holding a Poptart on a napkin, and she sits it down on the bed next to me. I'm not hungry and my stomach feels funny, but I take a bite because it's nice that she made it, especially because I've stayed in bed way past breakfast time.

"Okay," I nod and make myself sit up.

"You know you really don't have to go today if you aren't up for it. I promise it's okay if you want to stay home," she says like she's reading my mind.

But really, it's not okay. I know Hopper would dress up nice and say goodbye to me if I died, even if my body disappeared and wasn't going to be there, and even if he *really* didn't want to.

"I want to go," I say, trying to convince myself that it's true. "I'm just...tired. I think I stayed up too late last night." It's not really a lie because I did stay up very late, and I *am* tired.

Joyce looks like she doesn't really believe me, but she says okay anyway.

After she leaves, I take little bites of the crust on the Poptart, but I really can't eat it. Instead, I wrap the rest of it up in the napkin and hide it in the little table that's next to the bed.

I get dressed and spend too long trying to make my hair look better. Standing up for that long still hurts my leg, but I don't really have any other choice because I can't see in the mirror if I sit down.

Joyce tells me that I look perfect and even though I still don't want to go, I guess that makes me feel a little bit better.

When we get to the church, there are already a lot of cars and people there.

"All...of these people know Hopper?" I ask Joyce quietly when we find a spot inside to sit down.

"Yeah. It seems like the whole town is here, doesn't it?"

It seems weird that so many people knew Hopper because I never saw him with any of them besides the one man that helped us at the mall. But I guess because Hop was a policeman, that meant a lot of people knew him.

I let out a breath when I finally see someone else I recognize. It's Mike and his whole family, except his little sister isn't here. Mike waves at me and says something to his mom before coming over to sit next to me and Will.

"Hey guys. You look really pretty, El," Mike tells me.

"Thanks," I try to smile.

We don't talk a whole lot because it's kind of quiet inside. Mike sits next to me and holds my hand tight in his, even though it's kind of hot and sweaty.

I've never been inside a church before. This one has very colorful windows on both sides, and I can't stop looking at them and the way the sunlight makes them shine. The light from the shiny windows makes the flowers I picked out look even prettier.

There are some people standing at the front of the room talking to each other and looking at all the pictures of Hopper that are up taped up on a big board. I don't need to look at them because me and Joyce picked them all out. There aren't any of me and Hop up there, but that's okay because I don't think he would have liked too many people knowing about me and him. Besides, I only have one picture of us, and I didn't want it to get lost because I'll never be able to get another one if that happened.

There are pictures of Hopper from when he was really little and pictures when he was a grown up but before I knew him. There is even one of him and Joyce from when they were as old as me and Mike are now. I didn't know that they even knew each other for such

a long time. Sometimes I forget that grownups were kids once too. When I first saw the picture, I couldn't stop thinking about how Hop was looking at Joyce like Mike looks at me.

I thought only boyfriends and girlfriends looked at each other like that.

Soon someone walks up to the microphone and everyone sits down and it gets very quiet. The man starts by talking about how Hopper died and what a hero he was saving us all from the fire. I wish everyone could know the truth about how he really died, because the truth would make them know how brave he *really* was.

That would also mean everyone would know that it was my fault. I already feel bad enough, even though Joyce always tells me that none of this was my fault.

Hopper was even in the newspaper the night after it happened. Joyce saved it for me, and I keep the article pressed in between the pages of front of Anne of Green Gables to keep it from getting lost and wrinkled.

There's only one time where I think I might cry, and it's not because I feel sad, but because I feel...well, I don't know what I feel. It happens when the man up front talks about Sara. I know Hopper loved Sara a whole lot, and the man said that they are together again. I don't understand how, and I can't ask Joyce about it right now because it's too quiet here.

Eventually, we all walk outside to the cemetery, and all I can think about is how my shoes are a little bit too big and feel extra slippery because it's so hot out now. They rub the sides of my feet and I have to curl up my toes when I walk to keep them from sliding off. I don't get why we have to go to the cemetery either because that's where dead people get buried and we have nothing left of Hop to bury.

"I know it's kind of weird, isn't it?" Joyce agrees with me when I ask. "I guess it's just sort of like a permanent place that people can go to remember him after this day is over."

"Oh," I say, even though I don't think I'll ever go here to remember

Hop.

When that part gets done, we go to another place that has a lot of food, and still, a lot of people. At least all of my friends are there, and I spend a lot of time with them because it feels weird listening to all the strangers talking to Joyce. It makes me feel like I'm doing something wrong because I'm not really supposed to be around a lot of people like this, but maybe none of that really matters anymore.

Later when most of the people are gone, we finally get to go home too.

I don't feel any better or worse about Hopper being gone than I did this morning, except now I'm just even more tired.

At least Joyce doesn't have to spend a lot of time worrying and talking on the phone with all of the people to get it planned anymore. I'm glad for that because Joyce seems very tired too.

When we get home, I go straight inside and take off Nancy's dress and shoes. I flop down on the couch and try to turn the tv on with my powers.

Nothing happens.

I know that I'm still very tired most days, but my powers really should be all charged up by now.

I grab the remote instead and flip through the channels before realizing I don't really care what's on the tv. I leave it on anyway because I don't like how quiet it is without it, and Jonathan and Will are both still down the hall in Jonathan's bedroom.

I don't know how to put into words what I feel now, but it's kind of like nothing and *everything* all at the same time.

For some reason, I keep thinking about Hopper and Sara. If he's with Sara now, then I bet he's happy, and maybe that would mean someday when I'm gone, I'll be with him again too. It's nice to think about Hopper being happy, but I still can't help but wish he was here with *me* instead. I know that makes me sound really bad because he was Sara's dad first, but I can't stop my mind from wishing that.

Joyce finally gets done in the shower and sits down next to me on the couch.

I lay my head down in her lap because when I feel weird like this, being with Joyce always makes me feel a little better.

I feel her fingers brush against my cheek. She says I got sunburned today and worries that it hurts, like it was her fault that the sun was bright and hot today or something.

I tell her it doesn't, and that's true; it just feels a little hot and kind of itchy.

I wish Joyce didn't always worry about me.

I know what it's like to worry about stuff all the time and it doesn't feel very good. It makes you really tired even when you don't do anything.

Sometimes I wish you could turn your brain off like when you turn off the tv and it's silent. I guess that's kind of like sleeping except my brain doesn't go black and silent very much even when I'm asleep.

Joyce combs my hair with her fingers, and I suddenly feel very, very sleepy.

Even though I feel like I don't belong here, and I know Joyce is not really my mom, I wonder if this is what it would feel like if she *was*? As I fall asleep, I think about how perfect everything would be if this could all stay the same *and* Hop could be here too.

Why couldn't it have been like that?

3. Day 37

“Hey, before you guys are all finished, there’s something that I’d like to talk to you about,” Joyce says when we are almost done eating dinner tonight. Will is already finished and he puts his plate in the sink and comes back to the table.

I set my fork down and stop eating so I can pay attention to Joyce. She seems a little nervous and it makes my stomach feel funny. I wonder if she needs to talk to us about something bad, but I look over at Jonathan and Will and they don’t seem to be worried, so I take a breath and try not to worry either.

“Well, you guys know that the store is closing in a few weeks, and I’ll need to find a new job. And I keep thinking about how it might be nice if we had a little bit more space, so um...I think now would be a good time for us to think about moving.”

“Really?” asks Will; he sounds excited about it. I’m sure he’d be happy to have his own bedroom again.

“Yeah,” Joyce smiles and lets out another nervous breath.

“Where were you thinking?” Jonathan asks. He doesn’t sound as excited as Will. Actually, now I think he sounds *and* looks worried.

“Well...I was thinking about maybe getting a little farther away from Hawkins.”

I look at Jonathan waiting for him to say something else, but he doesn’t and Joyce goes on.

“I was thinking maybe somewhere like...California.”

This doesn’t really sound like a *maybe*. This sounds like she’s already thought about this a lot, like a *for sure*.

“Mom?” Jonathan says quietly, like he thinks she’s just kidding, but even I can tell that she’s not.

“I know it’s a lot to think about,” Joyce sighs. “But I really think a

fresh start would be good for us.”

“No.” Will immediately says. He pushes his chair back away from the table like he doesn’t want to be part of this talk anymore. “Why would you make us go all the way to California?!”

“How- far is California?” I ask, looking at Joyce. I’ve heard of it before. It’s where Max and Billy used to live, and I know it’s pretty far away because Max’s dad still lives there, and she doesn’t get to see him very much.

“Really far. Like so far we’d have to ride a plane if we ever wanted to see Mike and everyone else again,” Will tells me. He looks mad but also like he’s going to cry, and I can’t help but feel like this is all my fault.

“It’s because of me, isn’t it?” I ask quietly.

“No, sweetie, no, it’s not because of you. Moving would be good for all of us. I know it’s a lot to think about, but I wanted to give you guys some time to process it because I understand that it is a big change,” Joyce says.

“When?” Jonathan asks. I know right away from the way that Jonathan sounds that he doesn’t think Joyce is going to change her mind.

“Well, our house is pretty much ready, so I am officially listing it for sale on Monday.”

That’s in two days from now because today is Saturday.

“And I guess, it would depend on how quickly it sells, but the store closes next month, and I suppose I will have to find a temporary job if the house doesn’t sell before that,” Joyce explains.

I *really* don’t like this.

I don’t want to move far away. I don’t want to leave Mike. I don’t want to leave my friends. I don’t want to leave the cabin. I don’t want to leave Hopper.

“And I think it would be good to try to get you guys into a new school before the school year has gotten too far along anyway,” Joyce adds.

“So you don’t really care what we want?” Will asks.

“Will-“ Jonathan warns him quietly shaking his head.

“What?!” Will gets up from the table. “Does dad know?”

“Actually, yes, he does. And your dad is okay with whatever I think would be best,” Joyce answers.

“Of course he doesn’t care.” Will rolls his eyes. “He never has!”

“Will, that’s not true-” Joyce starts to say before he interrupts her.

“I’m not going to California,” he shrugs his shoulders like if he’s says it, it will be true and Joyce can’t make him go. “This is bullshit and I’m not going!” Will repeats.

He heads towards his bedroom and slams the door shut, loud.

I’ve never heard any of them argue, and I’ve definitely never heard Will talk to Joyce like that before. I really, *really* don’t like the way this feels right now.

I know Joyce said this isn’t my fault, but it is. She wants me to go to school too, and I can’t go to school here in Hawkins. And this house is too small now only because of *me*. They were just fine before I got here.

“I’ll go talk to him,” Jonathan says.

“No.” Joyce shakes her head and puts her hand on his arm. “No, it’s okay. Just give him some space.”

Jonathan nods and gets up to take care of his plate too before going to his bedroom. And then it’s just me and Joyce left sitting at the table. I’m not hungry anymore, and I feel like I’m going to burst out crying any second now.

Joyce rubs her forehead and reaches for a cigarette. She kind of looks like she's going to cry too.

She lights it and lets out a big breath of smoke.

When I asked Hop why he smokes cigarettes if they are bad for him, he said that even though they're addictive garbage, he needed them and they make him feel better. I didn't understand exactly what he meant by that...what did he need to feel better from if he wasn't sick?

But I think I get it now because Joyce always smokes when she's extra worried about something, so I guess they must make her sort of feel better too.

"Oh sweetie," Joyce sighs. "I *know* this is a lot. Believe me, I know. But I only want what's best for everyone. Do you understand?"

I can't say anything because I don't want to start crying and I definitely don't want to yell at her. But if this was Hop making me move far away to California, I probably *would* yell and cry and tell him that it's bullshit just like Will did. Except I could never say anything like that to Joyce, so instead, I nod my head, and I don't say anything at all.

"Okay," she sighs again even though it sounds like she doesn't believe me. "We'll have plenty of time to go pack up all of your stuff at the cabin to take with us. And wherever we end up, I promise you'll have your very own bedroom."

I nod again, and I'm biting my lip so hard to stop myself from crying that I can taste blood.

All of my stuff...but what's going to happen to Hop's?

Joyce stands up and takes her plate to the sink. I can hear the sink filling with water.

It suddenly feels like someone has hit me in the stomach, and I can't catch my breath. The last time I felt like this was when I saw Joyce in the Starcourt parking lot after...everything.

Having my own room would be really nice right now because I have nowhere to go to be by myself. I put my silverware on my plate and take it over to the sink.

"I'm- going outside," I try to say but it only sounds like a whisper.

"Okay," she nods and agrees, but from the look on her face, I think she knows I'm not doing very good right now.

I walk over to the swing on the end of the porch and sit down. I pull my knees up tight and wrap my arms around them because sometimes that makes the empty feeling in my stomach feel better, but this time it doesn't, and I still can't catch my breath.

And then I actually do start crying which makes it even worse.

I try to make it quiet because I don't want anyone to hear me, but I know it's not quiet at all. I cry harder than I ever have and it doesn't seem right because moving away isn't worse than Hopper dying. It's kind of like all the tears that I've kept inside for a month are coming out right now, all at once.

I cry and cry until I'm so tired and it's so late that it's starting to get darker outside, and then like there's nothing left, my tears just stop. I sit up and look out at the woods.

I wonder what would happen if I just...left.

This isn't my family, and Joyce isn't my mom, and she doesn't have to be the one to take care of me.

But just as quickly as the thought comes into my head, it also makes me feel like a very horrible, bad person because a good person would never even think about doing something like that.

Joyce *isn't* my mom, but she still took me home and took such good care of me the night when I was so scared and hurt and sad, when I had no one else. If I left, she would worry, and Joyce has been through a whole lot already.

I decide to stay outside until I'm really tired and it has to be getting late. But if Will is still in his bedroom, I don't have anywhere else to

go anyway, and Joyce hasn't made me come inside yet.

I want to call Mike and tell him about moving. I know he's going to be really sad too. I've been away from him before for a very long time, and it was really hard. And if my powers never come back, I won't be able to see him at all, and we'll only be able to talk on the phone.

Or we'll have to ride a plane. I've never even been on a plane, and I bet riding a plane costs money...and neither of us have any money. The thought makes me feel like I might cry again because what if I don't see him again for a very, very long time.

The front door opens, and I look up from my knees again expecting to see Joyce, but it's actually Jonathan.

"Hey," he nods. "Mind if I sit?"

I shrug and he sits down on the swing next to me.

Jonathan sits quietly, and we swing back and forth for a few minutes.

Finally he sighs and says, "At least it'll be cool for you to finally get your own bedroom."

I shrug again. I'd rather never have a bedroom if it meant we could stay here, but I don't tell him that.

"Yeah..." he eventually says, even though I didn't tell him any of that out loud. "I know this kind of really sucks huh. I was pretty pissed when mom told us too. But after I've had a little time to think about it, I think she's right. It would be nice to get away from...everything that's happened here."

Jonathan's never lied to me to make me feel better, so I think he might really believe what he's saying.

"But what about our friends? Aren't you going to miss Nancy?" I finally ask.

"Yeah, of course, I'm going to miss her a lot. But the good thing is, every time I get to see her, I bet you will also get to see Mike. And

when we get to California, we can make new friends too.”

“I don’t know how to make friends,” I tell him quietly.

“Sure you do. You made friends with Mike, and Dustin, and Lucas.”

“That was...different.”

“I know.” Jonathan sighs. “If you want to know a secret, I don’t really know how to make friends either and I’ve been going to school for a long time. But you know what? Even if we don’t make friends, the cool thing is, we have each other. I used to just have Will and mom, but now I have you too, and all three of us will be in the same school.”

“What if everyone here forgets about us?”

“Do you think you will ever forget about Mike?”

I shake my head no.

“Exactly, so that’s nothing to worry about.”

I think about the real possibility of going to school and it actually makes me feel a little excited, but also really nervous.

Mike always talks about how school sucks, and I don’t know why because I think it would be okay getting to hang out with my friends all day. But he is a lot happier now that it’s summertime and he doesn’t have to go to school, so maybe it really does suck. Plus, Mike is smart and good at school things, and I know I won’t be. And I won’t have any friends, at least not right away. It won’t be the same having friends who can’t ever *really* know about me anyway. I hope Mike will be able to come visit a lot. Even if California is really far away, maybe Nancy can drive him to our house.

“Does your mom have any friends here?” I think to ask because I’ve never really seen Joyce with anyone.

Sometimes she talks on the phone with Murray, but it doesn’t always seem like she *wants* to talk to him. She paces a lot and talks quietly, like they are talking about secrets that she doesn’t want any of us to

hear, secrets that make her bite her nails. Last week, I thought I even heard her crying when she was talking on the phone with him.

“Um, yeah, I guess she has some friends because she’s lived here her whole life, but it’s different when you are grown up. You know, I think Hopper was actually her best friend,” he admits.

“He was?” I ask. That somehow surprises me.

“Yeah,” Jonathan shrugs. “I think so. He helped my mom out with...a lot.”

And suddenly I feel really sad again, not just about moving, but sad for Joyce.

Mike and Max are my best friends, and I couldn’t imagine either one of them dying too.

I guess I never really thought about Hopper having a best friend. It was always just me and him. But at his memorial there were a lot of people I didn’t know, so I guess he had a lot of friends I never knew about. It kind of feels like I didn’t even really know him at all. He was just my dad and a policeman, and I never really thought any harder about it.

I wonder if Joyce was crying on the phone because she misses Hop being her friend?

“I- I didn’t know that,” I say. “What do you think is going to happen to all of his things...I mean, after we move?”

“I’m sure mom would let you take anything you want with us. And maybe we can work on fixing up the cabin before we go, and it could be like our little place to stay when we come back here to visit.”

The thought of that makes me want to cry, but in a good way. “I would really like that,” I say after a minute. “It’s just, without my powers back, I don’t think I’d be very good at fixing any of it. And it’s *really* broken.” I don’t know if Jonathan remembers how bad it is.

“That’s okay. I know Nancy would help. And probably Robin and Steve too. Actually, I bet everyone would. It would be nice to have a

hang out spot. I mean, of course if you wouldn't mind."

I shake my head no right away and tell him, "That would be really good."

Even though everything is changing, for the first time in a lot of days, I actually feel a little bit happy. And it feels...kind of wrong? Like I shouldn't be happy because how could I ever be happy with Hop gone forever?

"Tell you what, I'll go check it out tomorrow and start to see what needs to be done, and then we can get to fixing it up."

"Thank you, Jonathan." I can't say much more because somehow, I feel like I might start to cry again. Not because I'm sad, but this time because I'm happy.

"El, I know this is all like so different for you being here with us, but I want you to know that I think of you just like I think of Will. You're a part of our family now, and if you ever need anything, if you just want to talk, or even not talk and just hang out or whatever, I'm here, okay?"

I turn and give him a hug.

After a second he adds, "I just know that if I was in your position, I would feel really, really alone. And I don't ever want you to feel like that. I mean, I know you have Mike and Max and everyone, but they aren't here all the time like we are. And especially after we move. It's going to be new and different for all of us. Even mom."

Jonathan is the only one of our friends that actually talks about his parent like she's...I don't know, like a person, and not just a mom. He thinks and actually cares about what she's feeling, and I think that makes him special. He's kind of like a grown up, but also still a kid.

"Do you miss your dad being here?" I wonder out loud.

"Actually, no, not really. I think maybe he used to care about us when we were little, and I guess he loved mom at some point, but all I really remember from when he lived here was how him and mom would fight pretty much all the time. That all got a lot better when

he moved out. I mean, him and mom still fought, but it was on the phone instead and she could just hang up on him,” Jonathan laughs. “And now that he doesn’t live that close, he doesn’t really call or try to make much time for us, and that’s okay with me because I don’t really want to be around him either.”

It’s kind of like their dad is *gone* too, even though he’s not. Maybe having a dad who is still alive but doesn’t care about you is worse than having a dad who is just gone.

“I think Will misses him more than I do only because he doesn’t remember what it was like having him around. How it made mom like a totally different person. I know she’s a lot happier without him.”

“Do you think she ever gets sad being all alone?”

“Um, yeah, I think sometimes she does. But it’s just- it’s hard now with everything because it’s not like she can tell anyone. And the last guy she dated, Bob?” Jonathan looks at me in question.

I nod, Mike told me about what happened to him.

“He’s gone too,” I answer.

“Yeah, so uhm, I think that’s partly why she was so close with Hopper. I mean, he’s like the only person who really knew what she’s gone through.”

“Did you know they knew each other like a *long* time ago?” I ask, thinking back to the picture of Hopper and Joyce from the memorial.

Jonathan nods. “Yeah, that too. They’ve known each other since they were like our age.”

“I hope we’re all still friends when we get to be grownups like that, especially after we have to move away.”

“I think we will be. There’s this saying that goes absence makes the heart grow fonder. It means that when people we love aren’t with us, we actually somehow end up loving them even more. It sounds kind of dumb, but I think that might be true. I know being apart from

everyone is going to be really hard, but maybe it will make the time we do get to spend with them that much better.”

“I hope so,” I whisper.

It’s dark outside now, and I think I’ve gotten at least 10 bug bites on my legs in just the past few minutes, so we both decide to go inside. Will’s bedroom door is open and he’s not in there anymore, so he must have already gone to bed in Jonathan’s room. Joyce is already in her bedroom too.

Jonathan tells me goodnight and I change into my pajamas. Even though I’m tired, my brain is thinking about too much and won’t settle down. I stay awake for another hour at least, until I hear something; it sounds like Joyce might be crying.

I climb out of bed and walk over to her closed bedroom door. My hand stops just before I knock, and I decide that maybe I shouldn’t because maybe she wants to be left alone like I did earlier. But then I also wonder if maybe she doesn’t want to be alone because she’s *always* alone now that her best friend isn’t here anymore.

I knock lightly on the door, thinking that if she doesn’t answer, I’ll just go back to bed. But Joyce opens the door in just a second, and I can for sure tell that she was crying because her eyes are red and her cheeks are wet. She’s always told me that it’s okay to cry, but it still feels weird when I see a grownup do it.

“Are you okay?” I ask her softly.

“Yeah, I’m okay sweetie. Just feeling a little...overwhelmed, that’s all,” she answers. “Do you need something hon?”

“Not really,” I shake my head. “But can I come in for a minute?” I ask hesitantly.

“Of course you can,” Joyce smiles kindly. She walks me over to her bed and pulls back the covers for me to climb in next to her. “Can’t sleep?”

I shake my head no.

"Yeah, me neither," she sighs. "I know your mind is probably thinking a lot about moving too. I just, I really think this is going to be good for us. I know it will be hard to leave at first, but there's some really beautiful places out in California. There's mountains, and it's nice weather all year. And I understand that leaving your friends is going to be the worst part about all of this, but I promise we will make it work so you can still see them all as much as we can," Joyce explains.

I was thinking about that earlier but not really anymore.

"Was Hopper your best friend?" The question just comes out kind of on accident, and Joyce doesn't answer me right away, so I start to apologize.

"No, no, it's okay. That question just surprised me, that's all," Joyce answers. "But um, yeah," she says after a second. "Yeah, he was my best friend."

"You miss him too," I say softly, realizing how lonely it would feel if my only best friend was gone.

Joyce wipes the tears off her cheek again.

"Yes, I do. I miss him a lot. He used to come into the store every day and talk to me just about nothing... and everything," she smiles. "I miss that."

"I'm really sorry that your friend is gone," I say. I instantly turn and hug her because I understand how alone she must feel. I was alone for so long and I know what it's like; it doesn't feel very good.

She hugs me back tightly in her arms. "Oh, sweetie, thank you. It's hard not having him around isn't it," she says softly.

"Sometimes it doesn't feel like he's really gone. I mean, I know that he is, but..."

"No, I know. I get it," Joyce answers. I scoot closer to her in bed and lay back against the pillows.

"Was Hop...ever your boyfriend?" I ask.

Joyce lets out a light laugh, even though she still has tears in her eyes. "No, he wasn't. We were only ever good friends."

"Oh. It's just that the picture of you and Hop from when you were kids, I thought he was looking at you like Mike sometimes looks at me so..."

Joyce smiles. "You think so?"

I shrug and smile too.

"I never really noticed that, but you might be right. He um..." It feels like Joyce wants to tell me something else but she also kind of looks like she might start to cry again. I don't want to make her cry more, but sometimes I feel better after crying so maybe she just really needs that too. "I just wish I could see him one more time," she finally says.

"Me too," I agree. I think about all the stuff I never got to tell him. How I never told him how much I loved him or told him thank you for taking care of me for so long. "I wish he would have let me come with you guys that night because I know I was tired, but maybe I could have helped, maybe he would still be here if..." I stop talking; it doesn't matter anymore anyway.

"El, there was nothing Hop wanted more than to just make sure you were safe. I know it's really hard not to feel like maybe there was something more we could have done." I notice how Joyce says *we*, like for some reason, she thinks that this was her fault, and she feels guilty like I do. "He loved you so much and no matter who was there, he still would have done anything to make sure you were okay."

I lay my head down on her shoulder and sigh. I know she's right.

"Jonathan said maybe we can bring some of Hop's things when we move. Is that okay? I mean, I know he's not coming back, but sometimes it feels...I don't know, it feels better, like he's here when I see something that was his."

"Oh, baby, of course we can. I would like that too," she tells me.

Joyce kisses my forehead and I instantly feel sleepier here with her.

“Is it okay if I sleep here? Just for tonight,” I ask. I don’t really want to go back to my bed all by myself, but I know Joyce might want to be alone.

“You can sleep in here anytime you want,” Joyce promises.

I snuggle up against her and she wraps an arm around me. It reminds me of when I first came here, and I was sick. I remember sometimes when Joyce had to wake me up because of my head, I would be curled up sleeping in her arms. Though I missed Hop so much, it always made me feel better knowing Joyce was there with me. It makes me feel really, really awful thinking about how I wanted to run away earlier tonight.

I don’t have Hop anymore, but I do have Joyce for the rest of forever...Unless something happens to her someday too, I suddenly worry.

“Thank you. Not just for letting me sleep here, but for taking me with you when you move and for *everything* else,” I blurt out because what if something does happen to Joyce, and I never tell her those things, just like with Hopper.

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to thank me. I am so happy to have you here. I mean, of course I wish it could be under different circumstances,” she adds.

“It’s just, I know having me here costs money and makes everything harder for you-“

“El, I don’t ever want you to worry about those sort of things. Those are grownup worries and definitely nothing you ever need to thank me for or worry about, okay?”

“Yeah but you have to worry about us and all the kid stuff,” I tell her since she doesn’t only have to think about the grownup stuff but about everything instead.

“That’s because I’m the mom. It’s sort of my job to worry about the kid and grownup stuff, not yours.”

“Well, you should get paid for that job,” I tell her.

"I do, honey." She kisses my forehead again and smiles. "I get paid by getting to have you and Will and Jonathan for the rest of my life. I think that's pretty much all I need."

I hug Joyce a little tighter.

"But right now, we should probably *both* try to stop worrying tonight and get some sleep. What do you say?" she asks quietly.

I nod and close my eyes. "Goodnight Joyce," I whisper.

"Goodnight, sweetie."

I try to go to sleep but suddenly my bug bites feel super itchy. I use my foot to scratch them but it isn't enough. I rake my hands up and down my legs and now my arms feel itchy too.

After a few minutes of this, Joyce worries, "Is your leg bothering you?"

"Oh, no, sorry. It's just bug bites," I explain.

"Let me get you something for that," she says, climbing out of bed. I start to follow her but she tells me to stay put.

Joyce comes back in a second carrying a bottle of something. She turns on a lamp next to the bed and pulls the covers down.

"Oh, honey, they got you good!"

I look down at my legs and they are red and bumpy from bug bites and streaky from me scratching them. Joyce pours out a little bit of stuff from the bottle on to her fingers. It's a pink colored lotion.

"I know it's hard not to scratch them but just give it a minute and you should feel better," she explains.

I do as she asks and I have to grip the sheets in my fingers to keep myself from scratching.

She takes the pink lotion and rubs it on each of my little spots. But I'm glad to find out that she is right, because it does start to feel

better after just a few seconds. She works her way down both of my legs, and her fingertips feel a little bit cold against my red, too hot skin which also helps. Joyce puts a little bit on the bug bites on my arms too and looks me over for any she missed.

"Oh hon, they even got you on your forehead," she says, gently rubbing a little of the pink lotion on an itchy spot near my eyebrow. "I know it's not perfect, but does it feel a little bit better?"

I nod. "It feels a lot better. Thank you."

Joyce tells me that she will leave the lotion on the nightstand next to the bed in case I need it during the night. She shuts the light off and climbs back into bed next to me.

It's only a few minutes that go by and I can feel myself falling asleep already so much easier than I did earlier. I don't know what I would do without Joyce.

The next thing I hear is, "*Eleven, are you listening?*"

His voice instantly makes me feel sick and my eyes pop open. I'm back somewhere familiar even though it feels like I haven't been there in a long, long time. I instantly know Papa is right next to me without even looking. I can sense him. I feel his hand on the back of my head, stroking my hair, but it doesn't make me feel safe or calm. It makes me feel angry and scared. I pull back from his touch and he just lets out a little smile, as if he's happy that I hate him.

"Today, we are going to learn an important lesson," Papa says.

I walk down the hallway next to him because I feel like I can't do anything else. I *should* run. I need to *hurt* him, but I can't. We pass a window and I see my reflection. It looks like me now, but it also doesn't look like me. I bring my hand up to my head and feel for my hair. It's short; all of my shoulder length hair is gone.

We stop in front of a door. "Open the door Eleven," Papa instructs.

I stand next to him, frozen. I can't move, I can't open the door, I can't do anything, but I manage to squeak out the word, "No."

I wait for him to answer, but he doesn't. We stand there for a minute and I finally turn to look at him to tell me what else to do but he's gone, and I'm alone. I look behind me and the whole, long hallway is empty. There's lots of doors, all unmarked. I test the handle on one and it opens. The room has rainbows on the wall and I instantly recognize it.

Only, it's not empty. There's bright, thick, red stuff smeared across the floors.

Blood. It's everywhere, so much that the smell makes me gag.

I slam the door shut and back up, running into another door. I would gladly do anything to get away from the first place. I really don't want to see where all the blood had come from.

I yank open the next door, and somehow there's the same rainbow on the wall...and more blood.

Except this time, I don't have to look around to see what made the bloody mess. Bodies of kids who are younger than I am now are everywhere, maybe 5 to 10 of them, but I don't stick around long enough to count. I know this wasn't the same room I first opened, it couldn't be.

"No," I mutter. I back up into the hallway and rip open the next unmarked room. Rainbows. Blood.

And the next one and the next one.

"Let me out of here!" I scream, though I know it's pointless. No one is listening and if someone was, they don't help me.

I run down the hall ripping the doors open until there's only one left. My hands are shaking when I turn the knob.

Rainbows. Blood.

Except this time

...oh god, please *no*.

This one has no kids.

Somehow it's much worse.

There's another puddle of thick, clumpy, red blood and lying face up in the middle is Hopper. His eyes are open but they are shiny looking and don't move. His skin is white and purple and red and puffy. I drop down to the floor.

"No," I whisper, the air knocked right out of me. I press my eyes shut tight and cover them with my hands. "No. Let me out of here. This isn't real. This isn't real," I tell myself again and again. I open my eyes to check to see if he's gone, but he's not, and now next to me, there's two more bodies. Joyce. Mike.

Gone...they're gone too. I turn away and instantly get sick, hot tears streaming down my cheeks.

I keep my eyes pressed closed but when I open them again, there's Max, and Will, and Jonathan.

I can't breathe. I can't get away from this.

"El, wake up, you're dreaming," I hear someone's voice call to me but it sounds like it's underwater.

A dream, I am dreaming, I know that. I just have to wake up. I squeeze my eyes closed tight again but when I open them, they're all still there.

"Eleven, see what's happened?" Papa's voice says from nowhere.

"El, come on sweetie. It's okay, wake up," the other gentle but worried voice calls to me again. I recognize that it's Joyce, which means she's still here. She's not gone.

"You were right Eleven. You created the monster and now he won't stop until-

I start screaming until I can't hear him anymore, and I keep screaming at myself to wake up.

I have to get out of here.

Finally, I come out of the dream like I'm being dropped out of the sky. I open my eyes and the room is dark. A hand reaches out to touch me and I scream again.

"Shh, sweetie, I'm sorry. It's just me," Joyce promises me again, her hand clutched tight over my shaking ones.

I look around the room in a panic that makes me dizzy. No rainbows. No blood. Just night time. Just Joyce's bedroom.

"You just had a bad dream, that's all," she tells me.

I let out a gasp of a breath and fall into her arms. Everytime I blink it's flashes of Hop, his neck twisted the wrong way, it's Joyce with blood coming from her eyes, and nose, and ears, and mouth...

I start uncontrollably sobbing, and now the room won't stop spinning.

"Baby, shhh, I've got you. I've got you honey, you're safe. You're safe now," Joyce promises me again and again, holding me in her arms. I cling to her as tight as I can. She's real. She's not gone. She's here talking to me. She's all that's keeping me from getting sucked back into that place again.

I feel her hand rubbing my back, the other cradling my head close to her neck. "It's okay, El. You're okay. You're okay," she repeats over and over again.

"I was there, Joy-ce," I choke out, even though I can't stop crying long enough to get out a few words. "I don't want to go back there."

I don't tell her where 'there' is and the last sentence comes out like it's one long word, but somehow she understands.

"I know, honey, I know. But you are never, ever going back to that place, okay? I promise you are never going back there. That was just a really awful dream, and I'm going to get you someplace so far away that you'll never have to worry about that ever again, okay?"

I nod against her chest because it's all I can manage. I know that I'm

awake now but I still can't stop seeing their faces everytime I close my eyes again. And I also can't keep my eyes open because it feels like the room is spinning around me like I'm laying on the merry-go-round at the park and someone is spinning it as fast as they can.

"Oh, sweetheart, shhh," Joyce whispers softly to me. She pulls the blanket up around us and folds her head down on top of mine. "Shh, it's okay, it's okay...I've got you baby."

"I...I don't feel good," I eventually manage to tell her. My throat burns like I'm going to get sick and I hear a loud buzzing sound in the background.

"I know sweetie, I know. That must have felt so real and scary. But I'm right here, okay? You're safe and that wasn't real. Shh, just try to breathe."

I try to but it's hard. My breaths are choppy and broken.

"I'm- sor-ry," I cry because I can't calm down. The noise and the spinning won't stop.

"You don't need to apologize for anything. I know how real some dreams can feel because I get them too. I don't know why our minds like to torture us like that."

Instead of focusing on the spinning and sick feeling, I make myself focus on the feeling of Joyce's hair against the back of my hand, her warm skin under my fingertips, the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes under me, her hand against my back.

She's not gone. And Mike, Max, Will, and Jonathan are not gone either. I will *never* have to see them like that.

This eventually works, at least enough that I can breathe again, but the spinning never totally stops and neither does the white noise. I drop my head and press one ear against Joyce's chest and cover my other ear with my other hand. Joyce covers my hand with hers too, her thumb gently strokes my skin.

I feel safer wrapped up like this but I just wish I could get Hopper out of my mind now too. Even though it was only a dream, he *is* gone

and I know he won't ever be coming back. Tonight that thought makes my chest hurt more than it ever has before, and I don't think I'm going to be able to sleep at all.